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THE MISSION OF AGRIPPA TO THE ORIENT IN 23 B. C.

BY DAVID MAGIE, JR.

Of all the idle rumors which attached themselves to illustrious men of Rome, and which have been carefully recorded by the historians of antiquity, none perhaps has been more generally and unhesitatingly accredited in modern times than that which was occasioned by the departure of Marcus Agrippa for the Orient in 23 B. C. Agrippa, who was then in his fortieth year,¹ had been for over twenty years the close friend and associate of Augustus. He had fought for him at Perusia,² at Naulochus,³ and at Actium.⁴ He had quelled revolts of the Gauls⁵ and the Dalmatians.⁶ He had been his colleague in the consulship,⁷ had held with him the censorial power,⁸ had in his absence given Julia in marriage to Marcellus,⁹ and, last of all, had received the surest token of his confidence and esteem in the gift of his signet ring, when the Princeps lay on what he thought would prove his death-bed.¹⁰ Then he departed suddenly for the East, and men said in Rome that the cause of his journey was his dislike and jealousy of Marcellus, then nineteen years old and holding his first public office, the curule aedileship.¹¹

The earliest version of the story is found in the history of Velleius Paterculus,¹² and reads as follows: *post cuius (Marcelli) obitum Agrippa, qui sub specie ministeriorum principalium profectus in Asiam, ut fama loquitur, ob tacitas cum Marcello offensiones praesenti se subduxerat tempori, reversus inde filiam Caesaris Iuliam . . . duxit uxorem.* It was then officially given out that Agrippa went to Asia on business for the Princeps, but

¹ He died (in 12 B. C.) in his fifty-first year: Plin. *N. H.* vii. 46.

² Appian. *B. C.* v. 31-33, 35.

³ Liv. *Per.* 129; Appian. *B. C.* v. 116-21.

⁴ Vell. Pat. ii. 85; Dio l. 14.

⁵ Dio xlviii. 49.

⁶ Dio xlix. 38.

⁷ In 28 B. C.

⁸ Mon. Anc. ii. 2.

⁹ Dio liii. 27.

¹⁰ Dio liii. 30, 31.

¹¹ He died (in 23 B. C.) in his twentieth year: Propert. iii (iv). 18. 15.

¹² ii. 93. 2.

rumor had it that he withdrew as a result of a quarrel with the nephew of Augustus. And it was as a voluntary withdrawal that this journey was known to the writers of the early second century, to Tacitus,¹ and to Suetonius, that prince of gossips, who attributes it in one place² to pique on Agrippa's part due to the feeling that Marcellus was given precedence over him, and in another³ to his desire not to stand in the young man's way in his advancement in public life. Thus there is a slight inconsistency in the details of the story as known to Suetonius, but great is the difference between this version of a voluntary withdrawal, and the more malicious report of an enforced retirement known to Pliny the Elder⁴ and Cassius Dio.⁵ The former, in a passage containing a long list of disappointments and disasters suffered by Augustus, many of which, untrue or maliciously interpreted, seem to have been drawn from hostile political pamphlets, includes the *pudenda Agrippae ablegatio*, while the later historian tells us in all seriousness that Augustus, seeing that Marcellus was not on friendly terms with Agrippa, and fearing that angry words and a quarrel might arise between his nephew and his old friend, immediately sent the latter to Syria. Dio adds, moreover, that Agrippa departed at once, but did not proceed to Syria, sending only his legates thither, and tarrying himself at Lesbos.

This then is the explanation, inconsistent, ill-founded and incredible, of the mysterious mission to the East of Augustus' ablest general and closest associate, which was bruited about in Rome, snatched at with avidity by all those whose taste for such rare morsels of gossip had been diligently cultivated, and has been repeated without question by our latter-day historians, whether, like Gardthausen,⁶ they would have us believe that Augustus sent his right-hand man into retirement to put an end to the bickerings between him and the youthful Marcellus, or, like Ferrero,⁷ they accept the other version, and, believing that Agrippa withdrew from motives of personal pique, draw an elaborate picture of the

¹ *Ann.* xiv. 53, where Seneca, urging Nero to allow him to retire, is made to plead as a precedent the *Mytilenense secretum* of Agrippa.

² *Aug.* 66.

³ *Tib.* 10.

⁴ *N. H.* vii. 149.

⁵ liii. 32.

⁶ *Augustus u. seine Zeit* I, pp. 732, 733.

⁷ *Grandezza e Decadenza di Roma* IV, p. 172.

mighty general sulking in Lesbos, like Achilles in his tent, while Syria was left ungoverned.

The story is inconsistent in detail, and its authority is poor. Expressly characterized by Velleius as a mere rumor, it is mentioned by Suetonius only to exemplify the chief fault of Agrippa, or to cite a precedent for Tiberius' retirement to Rhodes, while Tacitus knows only of the fact that Agrippa withdrew for a season to Mytilene. Pliny evidently drew from sources hostile to Augustus, whose enemies would not be slow to make capital out of such a story, and Dio, writing nearly two hundred and fifty years afterward, might easily have been misled by the prevailing rumors, especially if the true reason for this secret mission had never been made public.

Nor is it credible that the careful and far-seeing Augustus at a critical time in his principate sent his ablest associate into banishment, honorable though it might have purported to be, merely because he feared a quarrel between him and his boyish nephew, or that Agrippa, the hero of so many wars, who had refused a triumph,¹ and had twice been consul, was piqued because the young man had been admitted to the aedileship, and the pontificate, and had received from the Senate permission to stand for the consulship ten years before the legal age.² These explanations of his departure would seem questionable, were they backed by the best authorities. As it is, they are worthy of no man's belief.

That Agrippa's mission was a real one we know from Josephus, who, ignorant of the gossip of Rome, but well acquainted with the history and politics of the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, says nothing of any quarrel between Marcellus and Agrippa, but records expressly³ that the latter was sent to the Orient as the *διδάσχος* *Καίσαρι τῶν πέραν τοῦ Ἰουρίου*. And this was no ornamental title, nor was Agrippa a mere imperial legate of one or more eastern provinces, but, as Mommsen has shown,⁴ the *collega minor* of Augustus, vested with proconsular power extending over

¹ Dio xlviii. 49.

² Dio liii. 28.

³ *Ant. Jud.* xv. 10. 2.

⁴ *Res gestae divi Aug.*², pp. 163-65; *Röm. Staatsrecht* II³, p. 1151, n. 5.

the whole empire, and subordinate only to the Princeps.¹ But Agrippa, Josephus adds, proceeded no farther than Mytilene, where he wintered, receiving there with much cordiality King Herod the Great, who journeyed thither for the express purpose of meeting him, and afterward cementing the friendship thus formed by sending to the Jewish king unanswered and in chains some Gadarenes who had come to Mytilene to prefer charges against him.

But why did Augustus thus send his right-hand man to be his vicegerent in the Orient, and why did the usually energetic Agrippa, apparently leaving his mission unfulfilled, linger at Mytilene, and so lend color to the rumor of an *ablegatio*?

Grief and rage at the capture by the Parthians of the "spoils and standards of three Roman armies,"² had long rankled in the minds of all patriotic Romans, and ever since the battle of Actium and the apparently secure establishment of Augustus' power, there had been a general expectation that this new hero, the conqueror of the loathed Egyptian queen, would take vengeance on those hated enemies, and restore Roman prestige in the East.³ But the Princeps had been in no position to carry on an extensive war with those formidable barbarians to whom Crassus and Antony had succumbed. His power was too insecure to risk a campaign across the seas with possible, even probable, defeat as its result—a defeat which would be fatal to all his aspirations—and there was also a more pressing demand at home, for the empty treasury must be filled. And so the expedition against the Cantabrians and Asturians was undertaken⁴ in the hope of filling the public coffers with the gold of the Spanish mines,⁵ while an invasion of Britain was hinted at,⁶ that men's desire for the winning of the laurels of war might be satisfied. But the troops in Spain, even under the leadership of Augustus himself, achieved but slight success,⁷ and after the return of the Princeps to Rome in 24 the

¹This same power he afterward held as regent of Rome in 21 B. C. (Dio liv. 6), and as general commander of the West in 20 B. C. (Dio liv. 11).

²*Mon. Anc.* v. 40, 41.

³Cf. *Hor. Sat.* ii. 5. 62; *C. i.* 2. 22, 51; 12, 53, 54; 35. 31, 40; iii. 5. Verg. *Aen.* vi. 794; vii. 605 (perhaps written after 20 B. C.).

⁴In 26 B. C.

⁵Ferrero *op. cit.* IV, p. 28, n. 1.

⁶Dio liii. 22.

⁷Dio liii. 25.

unconquerable Spaniards revolted anew.¹ Nor did the expedition sent under Aelius Gallus to Arabia for the purpose of seizing the long-accumulated treasures of the Sabaeans accomplish greater results.² The time seemed critical, and it needed more than liberal largesses to the people³ to enable the emperor to hold his own against the malcontents. Discouraged by his illness early in 23, or, more probably, making use of an old ruse to strengthen his position,⁴ he announced his intention of resigning his extraordinary powers⁵—a resignation impossible with an aristocracy indifferent to the common weal and eager for the lucrative positions and for the gifts or advantageous leases of lands, by which the shrewd Augustus was binding them to his cause, and with a plebs mindful of recent donatives and hopeful for more. Thus all united to persuade the Princeps to continue to watch over the state. But the sudden popularity thus arising would not last of itself, nor would the games given with unwonted magnificence in the name of Marcellus⁶ satisfy the Roman's desire for great and glorious achievements. The Parthians still held the standards of Crassus and Antony, and until, by the recovery of these, national disgrace should be removed and national honor retrieved, the position of the Princeps would remain insecure.

But it appeared that the Fortune of the Roman people had afforded a safer and surer way of effecting this greatly desired triumph than the invasion of Parthia by the insufficient force of 40,000 men constituting the Syrian Army. Two years before,⁷ Tiridates, whom a revolution had placed upon the Parthian throne, and who had been expelled therefrom by the rightful king Phraates with the help of the Scythians, had come to Augustus in the hope of enlisting his sympathy and help in his cause, bringing with him as a valuable hostage the youngest son of his rival, whom amid the general confusion he had managed to abduct.⁸ Here lay the opportunity, which Augustus, as soon as

¹ Dio liii. 29.

² Dio liii. 29.

³ *Mon. Anc.* iii. 9; Dio liii. 28.

⁴ Ferrero IV, pp. 165 ff.

⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 28 and Ferrero IV, p. 164, n. 1.

⁶ Plin. *N. H.* xix. 24; Dio liii. 31.

⁷ Augustus was at the time in Spain.

⁸ Iustin. xlii. 5. 6; cf. Dio li. 18.

there was quiet in Spain, and he had strengthened his hold upon his power by offering to resign it, was not slow to seize. Was not the Great King's own son worth more to him than some standards captured by his predecessors? At any rate, the attempt to find out should be made. But the offer could not come from Rome, lest national vanity should be wounded, nor could Augustus seem to be ready to buy his success. Some one must quietly suggest to the Parthian monarch that by offering acceptable terms he could secure his son, and the man obviously best qualified to negotiate the bargain was he who stood next to the Princeps. Was not this then the reason why Agrippa went to the Orient as the vicegerent of Augustus, and this the object of his mission? In Rome men wondered why he set forth, vested with extraordinary powers, and provided with legates, and they hinted at a rupture between the emperor and his friend and at an honorable dismissal of the latter. But Agrippa, with his record of victory and triumph, was willing to let the gossips talk, and to allow the real reason for his departure to remain a secret, as it must, were not the dignity of Augustus to suffer. And his actions in the East seemed to confirm the rumors, for he lay inactive in the pleasant town of Mytilene, while only his legates went to Syria¹—and thence to Parthia. But Lesbos was a convenient place in which he might await the return of these legates, and whence he might conduct further negotiations with the Great King. It was but a short trip across the strait to the terminus of the great road which ran up the valley of the Hermus, and thence through Phrygia, Lycaonia, and Cilicia to Zeugma, Carrhae and Ctesiphon,² and while Antioch might have seemed more convenient for communications with Phraates, the purpose of his mission could hardly have been concealed, had messengers kept coming and going between the Parthian king and the Roman governor residing in the Syrian capital. Also at either Tarsus or Ephesus there would have been danger of publicity. Furthermore, if Agrippa was

¹ Dio liii. 32.

² The distance by this route from Sardes to Ctesiphon is approximately 1,200 (Roman) miles, and could readily be covered in three weeks. The government post averaged 120 miles per day (Friedländer *S. G.* II⁶, p. 22), but the envoys would hardly travel so fast.

willing to conceal the object of his journey under the cover of a retirement from court, Mytilene, where illustrious Romans had ere this lived in exile,¹ would seem a natural place in which to spend the years of an *ablegatio*, and was, moreover, a charming spot² in which to tarry until the transaction should be completed. How much negotiating was necessary to persuade Phraates to send an embassy to Rome and to offer to submit to the form of a surrender in order to recover his kidnapped son, we do not know, but the efforts of Agrippa were finally successful, for in the late summer or the early autumn of 23,³ envoys from the Great King arrived in Rome asking for the surrender of Tiridates and the return of the young prince.⁴ Augustus refused to deliver Tiridates to his rival—he might yet prove serviceable, and his promises to make Parthia a vassal-state of Rome might still be made use of, should Phraates fail to deliver the standards—but he graciously consented to give up the prince upon the condition that the standards and captive soldiers of the armies of Crassus and Antony should be returned.⁵ Thus the great triumph was achieved without loss of blood or honor, and the man who had been instrumental in bringing it to pass stayed on in Mytilene, quietly watching over the interests of the eastern provinces, securing for the government of Augustus the friendship and support of the Jewish king,⁶ and in general preparing the way for the projected journey of the Princes through the Orient. For the Emperor himself was to go to the Euphrates to receive the submission of the Parthian monarch,⁷ and in connection with it to make an elaborate tour of inspection through all the provinces of the East. But before he could leave the West, his colleague must return to take his place, and so in the

¹E. g., P. Rutilius Rufus; Cic. *Pro Rab. Post.* 10, 27.

²Hor. *C.* i. 7. 1; *Epp.* i. 11. 17.

³The embassy was received by Augustus after he had resigned the consulship, and the senate had conferred on him the annual tribunician power, i. e., after July 1 (Mommsen *Röm. Staatsrecht* II³, p. 797, n. 3).

⁴Iustin. xlii. 5. 7-9; Dio liii. 33.

⁵Justinus says (xlii. 5. 9) *filium sine pretio remisit*, but the terms of the bargain were undoubtedly kept secret, although by Dio's time they were generally known.

⁶Cf. Josephus *Ant. Jud.* xv. 10. 3.

⁷Cf. the representations on coins of the kneeling Parthian giving back the standards; e. g., Cohen I², pp. 70 and 113.

winter of 22–21 Agrippa was summoned to Sicily,¹ where Augustus had begun his reforms, and received supreme command of Rome and of the West,² and, as an especial mark of honor, the hand of Julia, left a widow by the death of Marcellus in the end of the year 23.³ Such we may feel sure, would not have been the reception of Agrippa had he left Rome in a fit of jealousy, or had he been relegated to an island.

Agrippa at once betook himself to his new charge, putting down disorder in the city and rebellion in Spain with the strong hand,⁴ while Augustus, confident of the fidelity of his colleague and of his ability to govern the West, journeyed through the Orient, strengthening his hold upon one province after another, and, a year later, upon the loyalty of all patriotic citizens by receiving from the Parthian king the standards and prisoners captured so many years before. He brought them home in triumph, as though the Parthians had been conquered in battle,⁵ and ascending the Capitoline, solemnly placed them in a shrine dedicated to Mars Ultor,⁶ even as victorious generals had dedicated their spolia opima to Jupiter Feretrius in the brave days of old.

It may seem to us a farce, but it was none the less a great triumph and fraught with results to the eastern policy of the early principate. The diplomacy of Agrippa had proved mightier than the swords of Crassus and Antony, and Augustus and his conservative successor profited thereby, and throughout their lives maintained a policy of peace and friendliness with the great empire which lay to the east of the Roman world.

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¹Dio liv. 6. ²Dio liv. 11. ³Suet. *Aug.* 63; Dio liv. 6. ⁴Dio liv. 6. 11.

⁵Cf. *Mon. Anc. Gr.* xvi. 4: Πάρθους . . . σκῦλα καὶ σημέας ἀποδοῦναι ἐμοὶ . . . ἡγάγκασα.

⁶*Mon. Anc.* v. 42, 43; Dio liv. 8. This was of course the building erected in 20 B. C., not the temple in the Forum Augusti which was dedicated in 2 B. C. (Mommsen *Res gestae divi Aug.*, p. 126.)